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ABSTRACT

Educational research cited in this paper suggests that the involvement of low socioeconomic status (SES) parents in the educational process has a positive influence on their children's academic achievement. At the preschool level, programs in which parents were instructed in ways to promote their children's intellectual development were found to be particularly successful in producing long-term improvements in student achievement. In some cases, parents working as paraprofessionals in the school or as advisors for preschool programs produced student achievement gains. At the elementary level, the limited research available indicates that parents serving as tutors for their children can improve achievement. The success of parental involvement programs may be endangered by many obstacles. Included among these are incomplete program implementation, parental attitudes about serving as an educator, disinterest or discouragement, and negative attitudes toward the program. These obstacles, although troublesome, can be effectively overcome. (Author/JM)

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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the
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BACKGROUND

The term "parental involvement" has been used to refer to a wide variety of activities by parents, including:

- parents tutoring their child on specific tasks, or receiving training and using methods designed to generally enhance their child's intellectual development in the home;
- parents performing duties within the school, either as volunteers, or paid employees;
- parents serving as community aides, and acting as liaisons between the homes and schools;
- parents serving on committees and acting either as advisors or decision makers in matters concerning school practices;
- parents simply displaying general interest in their children's education, by keeping informed of their academic progress and/or attending parent-teacher conferences or PTA meetings (Safran, 1974; Stanford Research Institute, 1973).

Honig (1975) has documented the recent surge of interest in the involvement of parents in their children's education. She cites three historical trends as being responsible for this; dissipation of intervention (educational) effects where parents weren't involved, observed cultural and familial differences in the abilities of parents to teach their own children effectively, and the accumulation of evidence of the effectiveness of parent involvement in young children's education in influencing academic motivation and achievement.

This paper will begin with an examination of what research has to say about the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement. This will be followed by a review, of a practical nature, of some of the difficulties associated with putting theory and research into practice in the public school setting.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Parental involvement activities and their impact on academic achievement can be best examined separately for the preschool and the elementary years.

Preschool Level

At the preschool level, research studies generally indicate that parental involvement has a beneficial impact on intellectual development. Studies in which parents were instructed concerning methods of promoting their child's intellectual development in the home were found to be successful whether the child was simultaneously enrolled in a preschool program or not (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Schaefer and Edgerton, 1974; Brophy et. al., 1975; Honig, 1975). A few studies have investigated the effect of employing parents as paraprofessional staff in home visit and other early childhood programs. Generally, positive impacts have been found for participating children. Evaluations of preschool programs which encourage involvement of parents in classroom, decision-making, and related activities have generally found that students with parents who become actively involved have higher academic achievement than children with non-participating parents (Stanford Research Institute, 1973; Willmon, 1969).

Bronfenbrenner (1974) reviewed the results of nine early education programs which focused simultaneously on both the parents and child, and reported that substantial IQ and achievement score gains were still found three to four years after the end of the intervention programs. The effects were cumulative from year to year, both during the program, and in some cases, after the program's end. Achievement and IQ scores typically reveal similar results. The IQ gains were greatest for the children who entered the intervention programs earliest (i.e., 1-2 year olds). Also, parent

involvement was found to be of benefit not only to the target child, but also to his or her siblings. Gains from parental involvement during the preschool years were reported to be less when a staff member (such as a teacher), rather than the parent, assumed the primary responsibility for the child's development.

Radin (1971) conducted a study which illustrates the effect of different amounts of parental involvement. In Radin's research, the group with maximum parent involvement showed the most intellectual growth. Radin concluded that a parental involvement program is important, even though the effects on achievement may not be immediate. The parents' perceptions of themselves as educators may improve over time and change parent behavior in ways which promote the child's cognitive development.

Willmon (1969) found that the parents who were actively involved in their child's preschool education (by supervising field trips, giving demonstrations, helping with learning activities and class projects) had children who made significantly better scores on reading readiness one year later, when compared to children whose parents showed no involvement.

Thus, parental involvement does seem beneficial to academic achievement and intellectual development at the preschool level. Further research is necessary, however, to determine the most successful types of involvement, the optimal amount needed, and whether an organized preschool program is also necessary to improve achievement.

Elementary Level

The research concerning the effect of parental involvement on academic achievement at the elementary school level is not as plentiful as that

for the preschool years.

Some studies deal with efforts to teach low SES parents tutoring skills to improve studen achievement. McConnell (1974) successfully used this technique for a bilingual migrant project. Parents tutored small groups of children from migratory families, and provided supplemental tutoring to students leaving the Head Start program when the families were non-migratory. In a study by McKinney (1975), students whose parents received 30 hours of training in tutoring skills showed significantly better performance in reading and math than the children of parents who were not trained. Also, parents who received the training displayed a much more positive attitude toward school. O'Neil (1975) studied first, second, and third grade students who were at least one year below grade level in reading. Of these, students who were tutored by their parents received higher reading achievement scores than those who were not. However, children of parents who received weekly supervision did not do significantly better than children whose parents were simply given an instructional guide.

The Stanford Research Institute (1973) reported that a Michigan project was successful in getting parents to read to, listen to, and provide study space for their children, with a corresponding increase in academic achievement. Clegg (1973) designed eight word games for low SES parents to play with their second grade children. She found that children exposed to the games had higher achievement in vocabulary and composite reading than similar children without such exposure.

In a study by Henderson and Swanson (1974), parents were trained to use social learning principles to develop question-asking skills in their

first grade children. Significant differences were found between the children of trained and untrained parents in terms of academic achievement and the amount of question-asking exhibited.

A few studies have reported somewhat less positive results from parental involvement programs. Heisler and Crowley (1969) attempted to increase the involvement of low SES first and second graders in classroom activities and educational programs at school. They reported only limited educational improvement after a long-term effort. It should be noted that this program depended on parents coming to the school to participate, as opposed to having a school reprsentative visit the home. A study of programs employing a home-based intervention model designed by the University of Florida reports mixed results. Children in some experimental programs showed consistent achievement advantages over comparison groups, while others did not. The project evaluators, however, suggested that data collection problems were evident in most of the unsuccessful experimental programs.

Bronfenbrenner (1974) reports the 1968 findings of Smith, who found that parent involvement which was continuous from preschool through the sixth grade was successful in maintaining achievement gains by the students. This led Bronfenbrenner to conclude that during the elementary school years, the parent should support the child's school activities at home and participate in activities at school which directly affect his or her child. Thus, the parent need not act as the child's primary teacher, but should act in an important support role which helps sustain and enhance the effects of school programs.

Thus far, it seems that programs designed to train low SES parents in tutoring techniques have been the most successful in improving achievement in elementary school students. However, a great deal of additional research is still needed before any general conclusions can be drawn concerning the role parents should play in their child's education at the elementary level in order to improve achievement.

In a general sense, it seems that parental involvement can be effective in improving the academic achievement of low SES and ethnic minority children. Improving the parents' knowledge of ways in which to promote the child's general intellectual development and academic achievement can potentially be very beneficial. Changing the parents' attitudes toward the school and their child's academic potential, as well as the parents' own feeling of competence in the role of teacher, may be an important first step to improving student achievement. Future research will do well to focus on delineating the most effective methods of employing parents in their childrens' education to improve their achievement.

DIFFICULTIES IN CARRYING OUT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS

Despite the rather well documented *potential benefits* to be derived from implementing a parental involvement program at the preschool or elementary school level, the parent educator must be prepared to deal with a variety of *potential obstacles* before achieving success. Honig (1975) describes such pitfalls and the following section of this paper is a summary of her work. Several impediments to the successful parental involvement program will be discussed along with suggestions for their remediation.

Parent Has Difficulty In Seeing Self As An Educator

Parents may have difficulty conceptualizing themselves as someone who has the ability to teach something to the child. To help deal with this, several steps are necessary. To begin with, the parent must be supplied the skills necessary to carry out the desired training, tutoring, or interacting. Such training requires a parent trainer who has substantial skills in dealing with parents on both an individual and group level. During the course of training the parent, the parent should be treated as a valuable resource. The school must be receptive to the ideas suggested by its parents, must make a considered decision about what it wants its volunteers to do, must have a reasonable schedule for them and have someone to coordinate the program in the building. Someone in the school or external program should be responsible for the selection, training, and assignment of parent volunteers or trainers.

Parent Becomes Disinterested or Discouraged

The parent may become discouraged when his or her hard labor seems to have no immediate impact on the child. Patience is a virtue that cannot be underestimated when dealing with parental involvement programs. The need for such patience and perseveration extends to both parent and parent trainer. Training programs should be realistically scheduled, without placing unaccostumed time burdens on the parent. Outcome goals should be realistic and obtainable. The parent should not be promised a rose garden for his or her efforts if this is not likely. On the other hand, achievement should always be pointed out to the parent, with ample reinforcement and credit where credit is due.

Negative Attitude In Parent Or School Personnel

Parental involvement programs may be interpreted by parents as a statement that they have not done their "job" correctly, that the home visitor can do a better job in dealing with the child. If a home visitor feels that he or she is more competent than the parent and works with the child instead of the parent on home visits, this message will be clear. It is important that, through modeling and reinforcement, the parent be made aware that the primary task of any home visits, home training, and so forth is to help the parent learn how to interact in experiences with their own children. The parent, over the course of time, should develop a sense of "ownership" in the activities being carried out between child and parent. This outcome may be fostered by techniques discussed earlier, such as continually asking the parent for their input, ideas, and suggestions.

Ironically, many teachers respond with fear or anger to the possibility of parental involvement programs. Such programs may be accepted if they are limited in scope, but attempts to install the parent as an active educational partner may be viewed by the teacher as threatening. Teachers may view at-home teaching or tutoring efforts as disruptive to their classroom efforts. As with the parent, the teacher may also feel that the implementation of a parental involvement program implies that someone feels they are not doing their job correctly, that they need some extra help. Such attitudes must be rechanneled to a conceptualization of parental involvement programs as a "team" effort in which all members of the team have a common goal, improvement in some area of the child's achievement,

behavior, or attitudes.

Improper Program Implementation

Parental involvement programs that lack clear-cut supervision, planning, and specificity are often doomed to failure. Once program activities have been decided upon, it is crucial that at least one person be given the responsibility of following through on these activities. Are the specified activities actually taking place? If not, why not? Do changes need to be made in plans? The evaluation of any parental involvement program should never be only summative in nature. While it if very important to seek some idea of how effective the program was in reaching its stated goals or outcomes, it is equally important to monitor the program's installation and processes. Such formative evaluation will allow for early detection of potentially problematic areas.

SUMMARY

In today's cost-effective educational system, a number of forces are combining to call for increased parental involvement. Federal programs and guidelines have required participation of parents as a prerequisite for funding, particularly for those programs involving low-income families. Educational and social research suggests that parental involvement in the educational process has a positive influence on the child's academic achievement. Research has found the following to be related to academic achievement (Ware, 1973; Brophy, et. al., 1975):

- the amount of academic guidance and direct instruction provided in the home;

- the cognitive level and style of the parents;
- the amount of reading and educational materials available in the home;
- the frequency of verbal contact between parents and child;
- the attitude of the parents toward the school;
- the parents' willingness to devote time to their children.

Observations that parents differ in their ability to teach children effectively, and the lack of success of intervention programs which do not involve parents, have led to efforts to improve the academic achievement of low SES and ethnic minority children by increasing the parents' involvement in their children's education.

The success of such parental involvement programs, however, may be endangered by a variety of obstacles. Included among these are: parental attitudes about serving as an educator, disinterest or discouragement, negative attitudes toward the program in general, and improper or incomplete program implementation. While these obstacles are troublesome, they may be effectively dealt with, providing they are recognized and addressed by the individuals responsible for the program.

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ABSTRACT

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Educational research suggests that the involvement of parents of low socio-economic status (SES) children in the educational process has a positive influence on the children's academic achievement.

At the preschool level, studies in which parents were instructed concerning methods of promoting their children's intellectual development were found to be particularly successful in producing long-term improvements in the academic achievement of low SES children. A few studies also report success in improving the achievement of low SES children whose parents work as paraprofessionals in the school, or serve in an advisory capacity for preschool programs.

At the elementary level, the rather limited research which is available indicates that parents who serve as tutors for their children can improve their children's academic achievement.

The process of implementing a successful parental intervention program requires care and sensitivity to potential obstacles. Several of these obstacles, along with general discussion of their remediation are presented.